

AMAZING STORIES

What I Learned From Teaching Science Fiction

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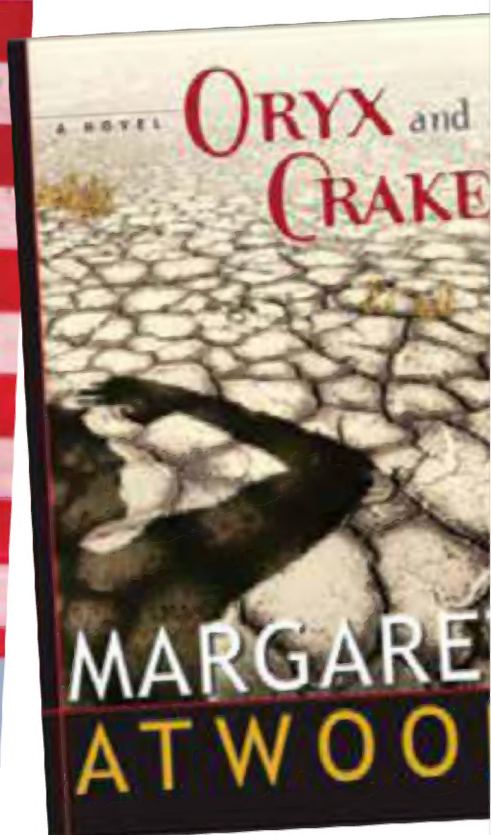
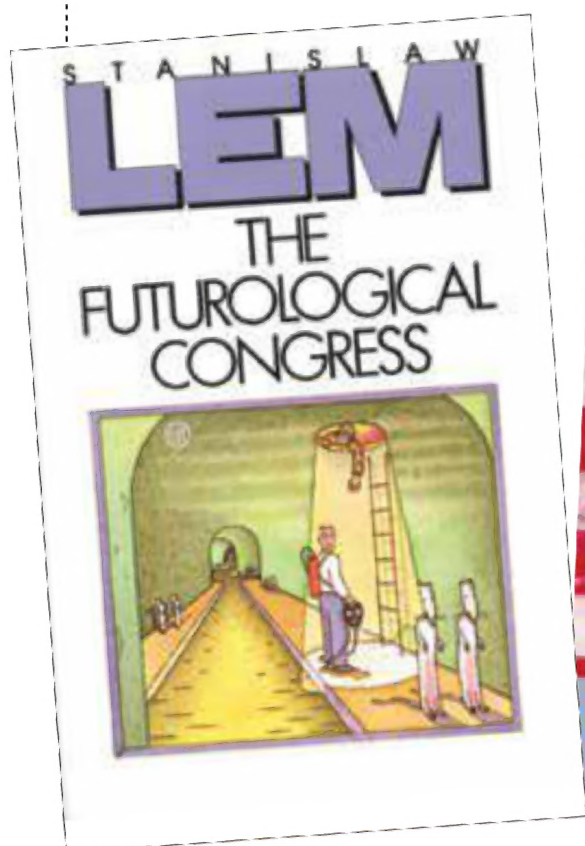
THE HEAPS OF SCIENCE FICTION books, movies, television, and comics I consumed as a child – and adult – over the years have been a mixed source of pride and chagrin. Almost everyone was impressed by the amount of material I had covered; on the other hand, more than a few of my teachers were distressed because I wasn't reading more serious and, dare we say it, *literary* material. I didn't care much about the naysayers, as I knew that science fiction fed my imagination in a very profound way.

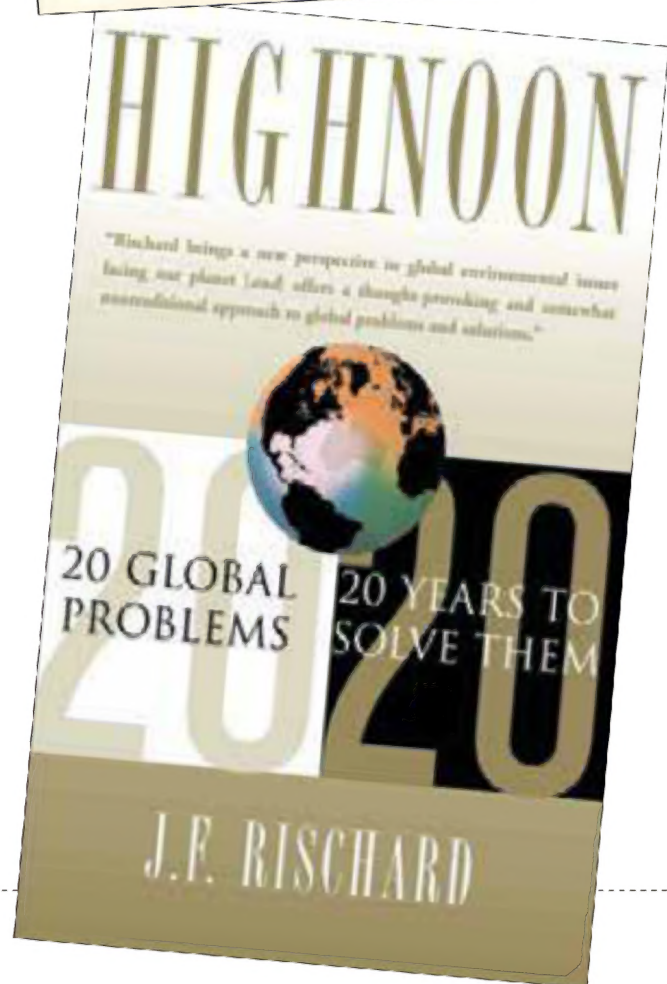
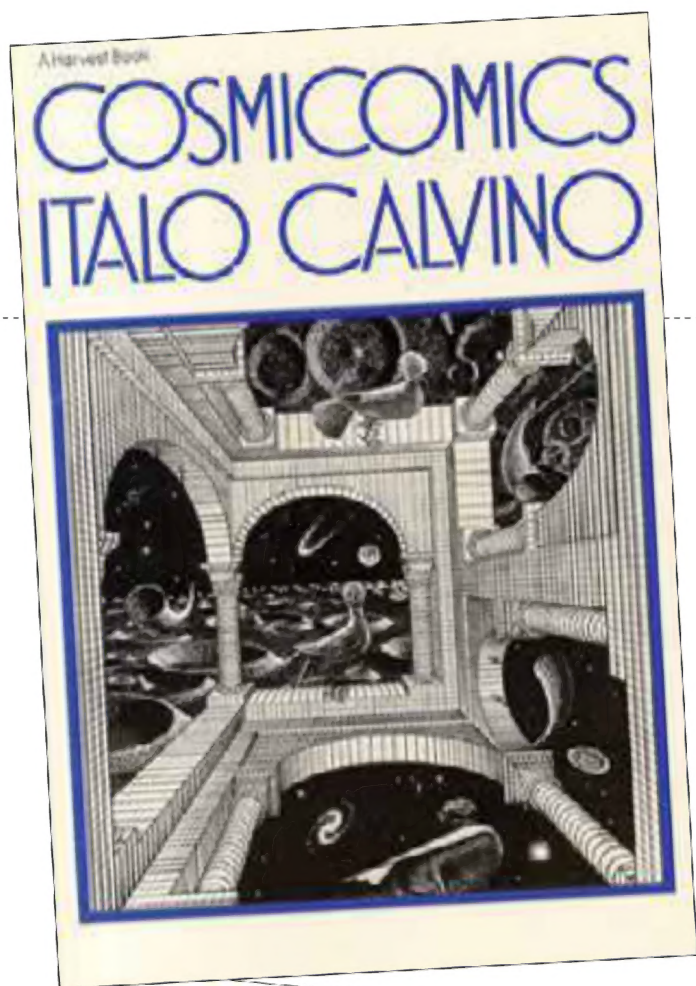
These days, of course, the lines between popular culture and elite culture are more fuzzy, and we've left behind the delegation of certain genres – science fiction, fantasy, westerns, detective stories – to scuzzy, pulpy slums outside the ivory tower of a "proper" literary canon. Once our ideas about the canon have been broadened, we can begin to make use of the particular qualities of a genre as a feature of instruction.

For several years I taught a course in science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism to Palmer Trinity seniors. Among several goals, I was most interested in using the speculative nature

of science fiction – the "What if?" at the heart of the genre – in encouraging students to think creatively about problems they might face in their own futures. One might take a look at J.F. Rischard's *High Noon: 20 Global Problems and 20 Years to Solve Them* as a starting point for thinking about what challenges the future might bring. In short, I wanted to explore how could we bring some serious *futureology* into the classroom? And who better to do this with than seniors, soon to be embarked on their own voyages into the future?

As a starting point for reading science fiction – a type of literature sometimes called speculative fiction – I wanted to give students a fairly obvious example of this "What if?" thinking. The Italian writer Italo Calvino's collection, *Cosmicomics*, worked well. Each of its stories use some sort of "fact" that science has presented to describe the universe. For instance, in the story "All At One Point," the moment just before the Big Bang provides the setting for a very strange world in which all its inhabitants – in which all things, really – exist in a single point. As the narrator explains, "Naturally, we were all there... Where else could we have been? Nobody





knew then that there could be space. Or time either: what use did we have for time, packed in there like sardines?"

After the "what-if-ness" sank in, we turned our attention to alternate histories. Based on what we know about the past and the present, how can we imagine a different course of events? In Philip K. Dick's, *The Man in the High Castle*, we follow the lives of characters struggling in an unfamiliar world. In this novel, by 1962, the Axis powers, having won World War II, now control much of America – Imperial Japan on the west coast and Nazi Germany in the east. *High Castle's* complex story is as much a mediation on the nature of history and fate as it is an examination of what fascism might look like when it speaks with an American accent.

Moving to a more pure, classic form of science fiction, a work like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* offered students the chance to discuss the possible effects of current-day trends: Inequitable income distribution, rampant consumerism, unregulated development in bioengineering, information technology, and robotics. In short, this novel asks the question about how humanity's obsession with the useful, profitable inventions of science can bring about the destruction of human society. In *Oryx and Crake*, the world *before* the collapse is, as you might expect, a little too similar to our own.

Finally, looking to the distant future, in the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem's, *The Futurological Congress*, the protagonist Ijon Tichy visits the Eighth World Futurological Congress, only to discover that the utopian world he inhabits is an illusion created by global political blocs who are locked into a cold war struggle for diminishing resources.

Certainly, particular themes informed my choice of these works – globalization, sustainability, ethics – but those themes have been reflected as ones that are important to the school. Presenting challenging dilemmas about what problems the future may bring is no easy task, but the vehicle of science fiction allowed us to have serious discussions about real problems in a way that proved less depressing. It's not that we didn't have our gloomy moments when confronting the possibility of overwhelming problems – because we did. The challenge, in the end, is to move students from the question of "What if?" to "What now?" And if science fiction teaches us anything, it's that anything is possible – including solutions to apparently impossible problems.